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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 154 (2014) 30 – 35

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

THE XXV ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE, LANGUAGE AND
CULTURE, 20-22 October 2014

The Art of Literary Adaptation and English-Language Film Interpretations of Russian Literature (‘Anna Karenina’)

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Abstract

This paper surveys the history of literary adaptation in Russian and Soviet film, then examines the issue of translation of a literary text into another language through film adaptation. It focuses on two recent English language adaptations of Lev Tolstoy’s novel *Анна Каренина* by Bernard Rose (1997) with the French actress Sophie Marceau, and Joe Wright’s recent version (2012) starring Keira Knightley. The paper will focus on the representation of Anna by French and British actresses, examining to what extent their interpretation of the role of a nineteenth century Russian literary heroine is informed by modern feminist readings of the novel. The central issue is: how successful can a literary work be translated into another language, and how successful can literature be embedded into a different culture.

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Peer-review under responsibility of National Research Tomsk State University.

Keywords: Adaptation; translation; nationality; heritage; identity

1. Introduction

Screen ‘translations’ of works from literature have always been popular in cinema industries throughout the world, and some of the world’s greatest films have been based on literary works, in particular novels. The director looking to adapt a work of literature is faced with a similar dilemma to that of the maker of historical films: how faithful should he remain to the original material, and how much should he ‘update’ it, or make it relevant to a

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contemporary audience? Just how much does ‘adaptation’ actually depart from the text, and is that, indeed, a good thing or not?

Given that film in Russia is high art, it is not surprising that the major writers of the nineteenth century have been accorded special attention: Tolstoy, Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, Alexander Ostrovsky, Lermontov and Chekhov have all been well served, especially during the Soviet period. Despite the reverence of directors towards the source material, most of these films remain simply filmic versions of the literary original, essentially theatrical and without much significant cinematic imagination, and with few allowances made for a cinema audience.

2. Fundamentals

Certainly, the enthusiasm with which early directors adapted works from the classical canon – Pushkin’s *The Queen of Spades* (two versions: 1910 and 1916), and *The Stationmaster* (1918), Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (1910), Tolstoy’s *Father Sergius* (1917), to name a few – testifies to the strong desire to make film more varied and challenging. Not only did these adaptations make the classics more accessible to a largely illiterate population, but they also gave the new medium some measure of intellectual respectability. Let us not forget that in its early years in Russia the cinema was seen by the critics very much as the ‘poor cousin’ of the rather grander theatrical tradition, and films were often derided for their sensationalist content.

Before the Revolution, literary adaptations not only ‘may have served an educational function of introducing less cultured audiences to the importance of these artistic monuments’, but the best of them ‘made a genuine contribution to the evolution of Russian film art’ (Youngblood, 1999, p. 127). Iakov Protazanov’s *Father Sergius* (Protazanov, 1917) is a case in point. Based on Lev Tolstoy’s story of the same name (1898), the major star of the time, Ivan Mozhukhin, plays Prince Kasatskii. The film has very high production values, with a cast of hundreds and extremely detailed and opulent costumes. There are also free-flowing moments of alcoholic and sensual abandon, and much erotic (not to say Freudian) suggestiveness. Mozhukhin also manages to portray a man tormented both by fate, and his own inner demons (‘the struggle between the spirit and the flesh’, as the inter-title explain), a hapless figure unable to avoid destitution and despondency. *Father Sergius* was remade in 1978 with a wooden Sergei Bondarchuk in the title role, and the emphasis very much on the sensual temptations testing the monk’s faith.

Directors of the ‘Golden Age’ of Soviet cinema (1924–30) also turned their attention to the literary classics, seeing the literary text as ideal material for the expression of diverse artistic credos. The literary classics were given a fresh and occasionally disconcerting makeover, where the ‘text’ is given greater credence by the stylistic and experimental cinematic forms and devices used to express it. One of the very first films of the period was Yakov Protazanov’s *Aelita, Queen of Mars* (1924), based on a 1923 novel by Alexei Tolstoy, is Soviet cinema’s first science-fiction film, and while remaining close to the original text features some visually arresting sets and costumes, and innovative dream sequences. Vsevolod Pudovkin’s adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s 1908 novel *Mother* (1926) is a good demonstration of the ‘montage’ technique of narrative and editing, and one which challenges Sergei Eisenstein’s more provocative practice. It also contains most of the motifs and themes of the socialist realist method that was to dominate Soviet art and literature from the early 1930s to the death of Stalin in 1953. The adaptation of Gogol’s *The Overcoat* in 1926 by the Leningrad-based Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS) exemplified that studio’s emphasis on extravagant visuals and disconcerting camera angles. In other words, the literary classics were given a fresh and occasionally disconcerting makeover, where the ‘text’ is given greater credence by the stylistic and experimental cinematic forms and devices used to express it. Pudovkin’s didacticism and obvious symbolism, and the film’s startling cinematic images and powerful narrative development, have left *Mother* as a much-emulated and widely-admired classic of the genre. It remains, however, a highly intellectual film, demanding the audience ‘read’ the symbolism and imagery. With the coming of sound cinema in the early 1930s, there was no longer any need to filter meaning through purely visual media. One of the most popular literary adaptations is that by Sergei and Georgii Vasilev of Dmitrii Furmanov’s novel *Chapaev*, made in 1934, and officially acclaimed as a classic of Soviet cinema.

The two decades between the adoption of Socialist Realism as the ‘only basic method’ of Soviet art in 1934 and Stalin’s death in 1953 did not see many adaptations of pre—revolutionary Russian literature; rather, the emphasis of the pre-War decade was a ‘cinema for the millions’, for with the coming of sound came also the Soviet musical comedy (*The Merry Lads*, 1934, *The Circus*, 1936, *Volga-Volga*, 1938, *Tractor Drivers*, 1939, *The Radiant Path*,

1940), historical epic (*Peter the First*, 1937-38, *Alexander Nevsky*, 1938, *Minin and Pozharsky*, 1939), and revolutionary blockbuster (*The Maxim Trilogy*, 1934-38, *Man with a Gun*, 1936, *Lenin in October*, 1937, *Lenin in 1918*, 1938). The Stalin years saw little attention to the classical literary heritage, with only a few minor adaptations of short prose works and plays by Pushkin, Chekhov, Gogol and Alexander Ostrovsky, directed by mainstream directors such as Vladimir Petrov, Isidor Annensky and Yakov Protazanov.

It is to be expected that film versions of post-1917 literature, especially those conforming to the dictates of socialist realism, would remain faithful to the plot and ideological thrust of the original. What is of more interest is the way in which directors can add their own ideological glosses to pre-1917 literary works, thus giving these film versions a socio-political slant missing in the literary original. By way of example, Alexander Ivanovsky's 1935 film of Pushkin's (unfinished) novella *Dubrovsky* shows the peasant masses joining Dubrovsky's revolt against the tyrannical landowner Troekurov, and even after the death of the hero they continue their revolt and right social wrongs. Pushkin is hijacked by Stalinist ideology, for in the original *Dubrovsky* does not die but flees abroad, and after his disappearance the looting stops.

The Lady with the Lapdog (1960) 'transfers' Chekhov's 1899 drama with great fidelity and is distinguished by the excellent playing of the two leads (Iia Savvina and Alexei Batalov). On the one hand, the peaceful, lyrical pacing, gentle musical score and the evocative Crimean setting, help vividly recreate Chekhov's sardonic picture of the complexities of relationships for a modern audience. On the other, in certain background scenes the film serves up a depressing picture of the social ills (poverty, despair, moral corruption of the upper classes) of *fin-de-siècle* Russia. Kheifets's film, despite its closeness to Chekhov's text (right down to the dialogue), adds its own critical gloss to its depiction of Tsarist society, so that the old world is portrayed as morally redundant, beset by intractable social problems and so ultimately doomed.

The most celebrated adaptation of Russian literature is Sergei Bondarchuk's seven-hour, four-part *War and Peace*, made between 1965 and 1967. Sergei Gerasimov had adapted *Quiet Flows the Don* as an epic panorama in three parts a decade earlier (1957-58), with larger-than-life characters and heightened tension throughout. Bondarchuk's film is even grander, with a huge cast of characters (120,000 extras) and a broad sweep of both land and history. Tolstoy's novel covers the years 1805 to 1812, culminating in the Battle of Borodino and Napoleon's long wintry retreat from Russia. Within this historical canvas are interwoven the lives of fictional characters: Natasha Rostova, Pierre Bezukhov, Andrei Bolkonsky and dozens, if not hundreds, of minor or secondary characters, ranging from Napoleon himself to the resigned and wise peasant Platon Karataev.

Bondarchuk remains faithful to the essential grandness of Tolstoy's concept. The film opens and ends with aerial tracking shots of the Russian countryside, accompanied by suitably patriotic music. Certainly, production values are high, with costumes, interiors and external locations all appearing authentic. In peace time, balls are attended by hundreds of guests. Battles, too, are fought out with thousands of extras, and the director comes close to expressing Tolstoy's views on war by combining aerial shots of troop movements with a sure feel for combat as experienced at close hand. The sheer disorientation and devastation of a battlefield is convincingly evoked. But Bondarchuk also reproduces whole dialogues from the novel, and often these are treated theatrically, with no sense of cinematic economy. The constant use of a voice-over that informs the viewer of the significance of events taking place on the screen reminds us that we are in the presence of 'great art'.

The decades following Stalin's death saw a certain liberalization of themes in Soviet cinema, and a greater investment by the State into film production. Thus, in the 1960s and 1970s most of the literary 'greats' were filmed, some (as with *War and Peace*) provided with huge budgets as prestige projects.

The 1960s in particular saw the 'epics' of the nineteenth century given lavish screen treatment, film versions generally stretching to several hours: Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment* (1970), *The Idiot* (1958) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1968). Tolstoy's *Resurrection* appeared in two parts in 1960 and 1962. This novel was written in 1899, a stinging attack on the corruption of the upper classes and the inadequacies of the Russian legal system that sees a young prostitute sent to prison, then to Siberia. The film has even been seen allegorically, given that it was made during Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policy. Soviet audiences would have had no difficulty in seeing the disconcerting parallels with the injustices and tyranny of the recent Stalinist past. Mikhail Shveitser's adaptation of *Resurrection* (1960-62) responds to the new political realities following Stalin's death in 1953 by 'inserting' dialogue that clearly links Tolstoy's theme of social injustice and judicial corruption to de-Stalinization. Similarly,

Ivan Pyrev 'ideologizes' *The Brothers Karamazov* (1968) by omitting some of Dostoevsky's key messages, and makes no mention of the uplifting theme of children and the future with which Dostoevsky ends his novel. Thus, the film ends with the relentless feeling of gloom and hopelessness in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Other adaptations similarly tried to update the literary material. In 1969 Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky filmed Turgenev's second novel, *A Nest of Gentlefolk*, written in 1859. While sticking close to Turgenev's story of doomed love between Lavretsky, the Russian literary 'superfluous man' of wit and talent who can find no real fulfilment in society, and the moral and incorruptible young girl Liza, Konchalovsky allows his camera to sweep across great vistas and panoramas of an unspoilt Russian countryside, and his depiction of male-female relationships has a palpable and quite daring eroticism. His *Uncle Vania* a year later featured some of the great actors of the day, including Innokenty Smoktunovsky, Sergei Bondarchuk, Irina Kupchenko and Vladimir Zeldin. It concentrates on the interaction of various characters and is predominantly shot indoors, with brooding passions and unresolved personal dilemmas (as ever with Chekhov). The film won considerable international acclaim. Nikita Mikhalkov's *Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1977) and *Oblovov* (1980) were similarly lauded, but both films seek to evoke an idealized picture of a rural and innocent Russia that has gone, with lingering shots of the unspoilt landscape juxtaposed with adult conversations on lost values and compromised principles. Both these films are also of interest in that they point forward to the more explicit nationalism of Mikhalkov's post-Soviet output.

The very existence of all these adaptations, which continue into the post-Soviet age, is clear evidence of the abiding love Russian film-makers have for their literary heritage. But in changing political climates, and within the occasionally fluctuating bounds of the existing censorship, film-makers were keen to show that the Russian literary heritage in many ways could speak to a modern audience and engage with topical sensibilities.

Two adaptations from the mid-1990s that speak of considerable cinematic maturity is Valery Todorovsky's *Katya Izmailova* (1994), based on the novella *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by Nikolai Leskov, and Sergei Bodrov's *A Prisoner of the Mountains* (1996), based on the short story by Lev Tolstoy. Both films update their nineteenth-century subject-matter to modern Russia, showing not only that old texts can say something meaningful about Russia a hundred years later, but also that Russian film can borrow heavily from other national film cultures to form both a synergy and a symmetry of style and theme.

In Todorovsky's film (also known as *Evenings Around Moscow*), the action is brought forward to the present, and is set in the 'new Russian' world of affluence, stylish clothes, cars, fashionable furniture and opulent interiors. There are several significant departures from the original nineteenth century text, in particular surrounding the personality of Katya. The first departure is that instead of a hated father-in-law, Katia kills her mother-in-law Irina Dmitrievna. In actual fact the killing is not the calculated murder by Leskov's cold-blooded heroine, but rather an impulsive, almost accidental act. Katya seeks to assume Irina Dmitrievna's creative mantle and fame. Moreover, Katya and Sergei try to replace Irina Dmitrievna's original text with a happy ending, the same happy ending Katya would like to see in her relationship with Sergei. Life must thus imitate literature. However, the upbeat ending is rejected by the publisher; correspondingly, Katya's life will not end happily.

Todorovsky has made a film that makes more than a nod to the nineteenth century literary tradition. Todorovsky refers to this tradition and effectively subverts then rewrites it. He has substantially revised and adapted the original text, in particular by adding some new elements, in order to give that text a relevance to the new Russia. The bones of Leskov's story are there, the director has created a new, radically different narrative for the late twentieth century. The classical Russian literature of old, so often vaunted as a cultural and moral reference point, is seen as inadequate for the modern world, it can no longer guide or teach 'how to live'. *A Prisoner of the Caucasus* is the title of a poem by both Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov in the early nineteenth century, as well as a short story by Lev Tolstoy. In Pushkin's poem (1822), a Russian nobleman serving in the Caucasus is captured by Circassians, and strikes up a relationship with a local girl. Pushkin's hero is full of admiration and respect for the dignity and strength of his captors. The girl falls in love with him, and helps him to escape. Lermontov's poem (1828) revisits Pushkin's, but ends tragically when the Russian is killed within sight of his own camp, and the girl is drowned in the Terek river.

Tolstoy's story concerns a Russian officer, Zhilin, who is serving with his unit in the Caucasus during the last century. He is captured by the Tartars as he attempts to leave his fort to return to mainland Russia. They keep him in a remote mountain village in order to extort a ransom for his release from his family, and he is soon joined by a fellow officer, Kostylin, also being held hostage. Bodrov retains the title (though in English it was released as *A*

Prisoner of the Mountains), plot and characters, but updates the setting to more recent times: the Chechen War. There are, however, significant changes to Tolstoi's narrative. Zhilin and his sergeant Sasha (NB not Kostylin, whose name suggests weakness and infirmity) are ambushed and captured by rebels while out on a routine patrol. Their captor Abdul-Marat wishes not to ransom his prisoners, but to exchange them for his son, who is a prisoner of the Russians in the local garrison town. The Russian troops throughout the film are portrayed as brutal, occupying forces, who think nothing of shooting at the locals, and who trade their guns for vodka. Sasha, the professional and cynical soldier, represents the Russia of aggressive imperialism and oppression, Zhilin the values of meekness, humility and respect. Bodrov reworks Tolstoy's original in his very positive treatment of the Caucasians, for whereas Tolstoy makes no effort to understand the Tartars or their culture, Bodrov shows in detail the rebels' culture and their world, shows them as humane and considerate, and displays sympathy for their feeling of injustice.

Both Todorovsky and Bodrov have taken 'hallowed' nineteenth century literary texts, reshaped, rethought and reinvented them for the modern age. The new millennium has witnessed further grandiose treatments of Russian literature, not least Sergei Solovlev's sumptuous version of *Anna Karenina* in 2010. Kira Muratova brought her own highly individual vision of absurdity and despair in *Chekhovian Motifs* (2004), an amalgamation of several Chekhov texts that serve to underline that writer's relevance for a troubled present. Alexei Balabanov's treatment of Bulgakov's short story *Morphine* (2010) amply demonstrated that director's aptitude for excessively naturalistic filming, an approach to film-making in the Putin era that has distinguished him as Russia's most controversial (i.e. opportunistic or provocative, depending on your stance) film-director.

When we look at English-language versions of the Russian literary heritage, we first and foremost note the 'Hollywoodization' of the Russian classics, especially seen in the scale and spectacle of King Vidor's *War and Peace*, the bravado ending of Richard Brooks's *The Brothers Karamazov* and the casting of *Taras Bulba* (the half-Russian actor Yul Brynner appeared in both *Taras Bulba* and *The Brothers Karamazov*). Also of interest is the generally negative Russian reception of *Onegin*, though Martha Fiennes's film is a generally faithful rendering with some imaginative treatment of Onegin's (and Pushkin's) personal predilections.

Just as with Russian interpretations, so there have been four English language versions of *Anna Karenina*, all intended as showcases for the major female stars of their respective period: Greta Garbo, Vivien Leigh, Sophie Marceau and Keira Knightley. The Russian language versions of Alexander Zarkhi and Sergei Solovlev have remained loyal to the original text and setting, with leading actors playing secondary and minor characters, and with the musical soundtrack provided by the leading composers of the day (Rodion Shchedrin and Anna Drubich). Also, the role of Anna has been played by leading actresses of the time: Tatyana Samoilova and Tatyana Drubich. Similarly, the four English-language versions have largely been seen as showcases for the female stars representing values of glamour, independence and vulnerability: Greta Garbo, Vivienne Leigh, Sophie Marceaux and Keira Knightley. In general, less attention has been paid to the minor characters and related stories, with the central drama of Anna's role as 'fallen woman' foregrounded, with the female stars encouraged to demonstrate the full range of their acting talents.

Bernard Rose's 1997 version is perhaps the least successful, with an anodyne and passionless Sophie Marceau looking glamorous and assured, but unable to penetrate the character of Anna beyond the surface gloss of her beauty. The film does, however, have a very 'Russian' sound and look to it, with many minor characters played by Russian actors, the music provided by Tchaikovsky, Rakhmaninov and Prokofev, and the film itself shot entirely in Russia between February and August 1996. In fact, the emphasis is on the 'Russianness' of the text and story, with authenticity and realism reflected in the use of the Winter Palace, Peterhof, the Menshikov Palace and the Yusupov Palace as major locations. One particular feature is the use of Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 6, played in key scenes where Anna's melancholy and ultimate tragedy are played out. Sean Bean, an actor who is associated with action-man and tough-guy roles, plays Vronsky, but never convinces that he has moved on from the *lumpen* status for which he has become famous. It's particularly innovative, however, in its explicit identification of Levin and the author himself, with Levin returning to his family at the end of the film and writing the story of the film.

Joe Wright's 2012 film was generally very well received, and Keira Knightley's performance praised in particular. The screenplay is by one of Great Britain's top dramatists, Tom Stoppard. The film follows the now-familiar content of the novel, but in visual terms it is very striking, with costumes and sets commanding the attention even more than the actors. This, indeed, is the point of the film: the novel's themes of social hypocrisy, jealousy,

faith and the pastoral idyll are undermined and largely satirized by the director, who emphasizes the surface gloss amid the very real personal pain felt by the leading characters. Wright's film is not only a re-screening of a classic, but very much a re-reading and re-interpreting, and his target is not only Tolstoy's earnest brow-beating, but the unsmiling seriousness of all of classical Russian literature. The fact that it is set in a theatre points to the artificiality at the heart of the subject. A very bold statement, indeed.

3. Conclusion

The literary heritage, then, has played a unique and occasionally paradigm-shifting role in the development of Russian cinema. Many directors have shown great pride in their adaptations, and the State has invested generously in some key projects. Even in the Soviet years adaptations could be used to explore shifting priorities and to express ideas of nationhood, and with the removal of censorship the 'classics' can speak to new generations on issues as varied as social collapse, sexual relationships, imperial ambitions, nationalism, and, ultimately, the relationship of the individual with the state. These films also help to 'fix' national identity in a time of flux, exploring new realities from set positions.

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